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STATE FOR AF/E AND A/S FRAZER

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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - AL-SHABAAB GAINS BUT BATTLES CONTINUE

REF: NAIROBI 1391

Classified By: Counselor for Somalia Affairs Bob Patterson. Reasons 1.  
4 (b,d).

11. (S/NF) SUMMARY. Despite partnering with the moderate Islamist Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) to create a unity government, Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) has been unable to influence security on the ground. TFG control in Somalia is limited to pockets of Mogadishu and Baidoa. Although Ethiopia remains, it has reduced its presence to about two thousand troops, and is now concentrated only in parts of Mogadishu and on the Somalia - Ethiopia border. ARS Chairman Sheikh Sharif has some control in the Hiraan and Middle Shabelle regions, but his influence is tenuous, and his forces are battling those allied with Asmara-based remnants of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). With most of his top commanders dead, former ICU defense minister "Indha'ade" has lost his relevance. Al-Shabaab and aligned groups have made significant gains in territory in southern and central Somalia and many communities have welcomed their promise of stability and a stated commitment to facilitate humanitarian access. Al-Shabaab aligned forces have made a recent push in the Galgaduud region and reports indicate it is interested in establishing a presence in the pirate town of Hobyo. At present, we have no evidence of a link between al-Shabaab and piracy.

12. (S/NF) Summary Continued: Al-Shabaab itself is divided, as al-Shabaab forces aligned with Hassan "al-Turki" and those allied with Mukhtar Robow vie for control. With significant financing from outside sources, al-Shabaab is offering training, salaries, and a chance to participate in "a jihad against Ethiopia." It is successfully recruiting new soldiers in IDP camps and from among the ranks of TFG security forces who are deserting with their equipment and weapons. Conflict between these groups and new insurgent militias, most often organized along clan lines, is increasing as each positions itself for an uncertain future. Against this background of fickle alliances, all of the armed groups are attempting to gain territory as leverage for determining Somalia's future political landscape. End summary.

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TFG on Life Support -  
Little Control of Territory  
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13. (S/NF) The protracted feud between Transitional Federal Government (TFG) President Yusuf and Prime Minister Nur Hassan Hussein increasingly features a Darod - Hawiye element and is damaging the TFG. The relationship between the TFG top

leadership has become so dysfunctional that, until their reportedly unproductive December 7 meeting in Baidoa, the two had not met face to face in months and Yusuf had habitually rebuffed the PM's calls. These divisions have had a direct impact on the TFG's ability to develop a common approach to reconciliation and security. For example, Minister of Defense Ibrahim Haji's (reftel) attempts to restructure and reorganize the Somali National Army have gone nowhere. In fact, the TFG controls far less territory than it did in June. At present, in most regions clan-based militias loyal to members of the TFG can no longer be identified as "TFG forces" as they had been earlier in the year. Most of these forces have re-joined clan-based alliances and no longer support TFG officials, whose administrations have collapsed in many areas that al-Shabaab and other armed groups now control. The current and former TFG officials in the country who still have security are protected by the armed militias they personally feed and pay.

¶4. (S/NF) In July, about two thousand Somali police and military trained by the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) over the course of four months returned to Somalia. However, the discipline, national spirit, and morale built during their basic training were quickly dashed. The Somali troops immediately came under attack and though they initially fared well, neither the TFG nor its international supporters provided the equipment and support necessary to sustain their victories. TFG security forces have not been paid in months and though the PM has repeatedly urged immediate international financial support, it has not materialized. Through UNDP's Rule of Law program, over 2,700

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TFG police should be receiving regular salaries, but they have not been paid since December 2007 (Note: We have been assured that these funds should be released soon and that the police officers will receive the first tranche of their back pay in the coming weeks.) The government's soldiers and police do not have command and control of any territory in the country outside of pockets of Mogadishu and Baidoa.

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Islamic Courts Split:  
Djibouti and Asmara Vie for Influence  
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¶5. (S/NF) Former ICU militias are split in their allegiances to the Djibouti-based ARS (ARS-D) led by Sheikh Sharif and the Asmara-based ARS faction (ARS-A), represented by Hassan Dahir Aweys. Even a third "Independent" ARS group has announced itself. Details of territorial control and conflict between ARS-D and ARS-A are unclear but together, both groups control much of the Hiraan, Middle Shabelle, Galguduud, and Mudug regions, although al-Shabaab has been making inroads even there in recent days. (Together, ARS-D and ARS-A are often referred to simply as the "Islamic Courts".) While Aweys may be chafing at the restrictions of life in Asmara, he remains there and continues to channel Eritrea-originated support for his fighters in their "jihad" against Ethiopia and to publicly criticize Sheikh Sharif's efforts to forge a unity government with the TFG. Financial incentives, more than any ideological allegiance to Aweys, reportedly drive ARS-A fighters as they work to create a quagmire for Ethiopia in Somalia.

¶6. (S/NF) Most Somalis believe the ICU/ARS factions can be reunited, and the more radical elements persuaded to support a peace process. While there have been occasional skirmishes among them, the source of most conflicts is sub-clan issues and, at least for now, these groups remain distinct from al-Shabaab. Past efforts to bring the factions together have failed, mostly due to disagreements over how to usher out Ethiopia and the Djibouti Process's usefulness. Former ICU Secretary of Defense Yusuf Mohamed Siad "Indha'ade," who enjoyed some support within his Hawiye/Habr Gedr/Ayr sub-clan, has effectively been sidelined from both ARS

factions and is reportedly in Mogadishu, where he is keeping a very low profile. Indha'ade has voiced opposition to the Djibouti process but with most of his top leadership dead, his influence has waned. ARS-D Chairman Sheikh Sharif continues to enjoy wide support, but most Somalis believe that he does not have al-Shabaab's deep financial pockets and, hence, exercises less influence on the ground. His decision to join forces with the TFG has also caused dismay in some quarters.

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The New and Improved al-Shabaab:  
Winning Territory, Hearts and Minds  
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17. (S/NF) In the last six months, al-Shabaab's gains across the country have been significant. During this period, the allied armed groups have changed its tactic from briefly taking over a selected city or town and then retreating, to establishing permanent administrations. Al-Shabaab is a very loose federation of groups (sometimes with very different priorities) but in general, they are disciplined, well-organized, well-financed, engaged at the grassroots, and able to tailor their strategy in order to win local support -- attributes that most other key actors (including the TFG) lack. Al-Shabaab has made inroads recently into the Galgaduud region. It took over the administration of Dhusamareb, the region's provincial capital, on December 8. There are reports that al-Shabaab's federated groups have their sites set on the Puntland pirate capital of Hobyo, in order to share in the financial windfall that ship hijackings bring. However, at present there is no/no evidence of a link between piracy and al-Shabaab terror activities.

18. (S/NF) Kismayo has become a pilot city for al-Shabaab's experiment in governance and the balancing act of managing clan and other rivalries as it strengthens its presence in the area. While al-Shabaab was quick to claim control in Kismayo, the "al-Shabaab" moniker there and in other locations in fact is used by many groups and individuals for

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convenience, economic benefit, or out of fear. There remains a clear division between Hassan Abdullah Hersi "al-Turki's" al-Shabaab (also referred to as the Ras Kamboni Group, for its origins near that southern Somali town) which controls most of Lower Juba and part of the Gedo region and the al-Shabaab that Mukhtar Robow "abu-Mansur" represents. (Robow's al-Shabaab controls most of Bay, Bakool, and the Lower Shabelle regions.) The two groups are distinct and compete for influence, yet they have managed to avoid significant armed conflict, mostly because they share the same enemy - Ethiopia. This temporary united front has allowed al-Shabaab to move aside administrations in southern Somalia that were formerly controlled by remnants of the ICU.

19. (S/NF) With al-Shabaab's recent gains, armed groups have advanced toward Mogadishu, but, possibly at the request of Mogadishu's elders, stopped in Afgoye where they reportedly have established five new training camps. Our contacts tell us that these Afgoye camps are small and train approximately 20 to 25 persons at one time. One camp is reportedly for boys between 13 and 15 years of age, where they receive weapons training and are learning to drive heavy trucks. The Afgoye bridge, still held by the ENDF, has become a key strategic choke point between Mogadishu and Baidoa, the TFG's administrative centers. Al-Shabaab's presence in the Afgoye corridor could enable it to challenge any Ethiopian withdrawal from Mogadishu. However, there are no indications that al-Shabaab is planning an assault on Mogadishu in the near future. At present, it seems content to bide its time, while it recruits new fighters from the IDP camps outside Somalia's capital.

10. (S/NF) While it has not led an assault on Mogadishu, al-Shabaab has made its presence felt. On December 8,

Mukhtar Robow led prayers for the Id al-Adha celebration in an open air setting for a reported 600 worshippers in Mogadishu. During the sermon, Robow denied claims that al-Shabaab had attacked the religious group Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a but said that his forces had fought and expelled "members of the group from Guriel financed by the United States." Robow stated that any cease-fire can only be reached by those fighting on the ground. He heaped scorn on the "foreign-led" Djibouti process and on Somali fellow travelers, who enjoy "the comfort of big hotels in foreign lands" and are out of touch with reality inside Somalia. Robow praised the fighters engaged in the "righteous struggle" against Ethiopia and claimed that the "enemy has been defeated." After the sermon, Robow's al-Shabaab offered a traditional meal and sweets in packages reportedly bearing its insignia.

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Communities Welcome  
Promise for Stability  
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¶11. (S/NF) Some influential clan elders in southern Somalia, have welcomed al-Shabaab's growing presence and its promise of stability. Unlike the TFG, which rarely connects with its constituents and has little contact with communities outside Mogadishu and Baidoa, al-Shabaab is adept at public outreach, and gives it top priority. Most often, a community receives notice just before al-Shabaab's arrival that the armed group is coming to "liberate" the residents and in most cases, no shots are fired. A "town hall" meeting is immediately organized and residents have the opportunity to engage in question-and-answer sessions with its leaders. In Merka for example, Mukhtar Robow publicly explained how al-Shabaab intended to manage daily issues and then immediately invited continued humanitarian assistance. On at least two occasions, al-Shabaab leaders have met with local and international NGOs in Merka and have held another meeting in Dinsoor where they have discussed coordination of humanitarian relief. The NGOs and humanitarian agencies that operate in Somalia must negotiate access with the authorities in their respective locations. To an increasing extent, those authorities are aligned with al-Shabaab.

¶12. (S/NF) On December 6, Robow's al-Shabaab established an administration to govern Merka and to "ensure the unhindered humanitarian access" it had promised for the region. On December 8, negotiations were underway to establish a similar administration in Wajid, though sub-clan dynamics have made

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this more difficult because the newly selected District Commissioner (DC) does not want the job his relative currently holds. By trial and error in Kismayo, groups associated with al-Shabaab seem to have developed a pragmatic approach to governance. In most towns, they appoint al-Shabaab adherents as DC and Deputy DC, but do not typically develop the administration further. Al-Shabaab makes these appointments based on community-level negotiations and does not employ a "one size fits all" model in the locations it controls. With a nuanced approach that recognizes the local dynamics, al-Shabaab seeks to avoid clan-based conflict. Clan conflict undermines the authority and influence of the groups under the al-Shabaab mantle. At the same time, Robow's al-Shabaab also appoints separate operatives, generally from another region, to ensure that religious doctrines and control are applied evenly by the new administrators.

¶13. (S/NF) Unlike in 2006, when the ICU came to power under the relatively moderate islamist Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, today's al-Shabaab has a more radical agenda. While most communities chafe under the hard-line fundamentalist ideology that some al-Shabaab local leaders and adherents espouse, as was the case with the ICU, residents, at least initially, welcome the new law and order. For example, we understand

that in territory it controls, al-Shabaab has removed roadblocks that were set up by TFG administrators and local clan militias to extort money. At the same time, there is opposition and rancor toward al-Shabaab for outlawing khat, movies, dancing, non-religious music, and other "sinful" activities. Just recently, al-Shabaab's troops stoned a mentally handicapped 13-year old girl wrongly accused of adultery and flogged celebratory dancers. Some accused spys have been beheaded. Most people we talk with in areas controlled by al-Shabaab tell us they hate living under their rules, but welcome order and relative peace after years of turmoil.

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Sophisticated Operations  
But New Entrants Threaten Influence  
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¶14. (S/NF) When we questioned our contacts who work inside Somalia about al-Shabaab's practice of allowing humanitarian access for some organizations, but not others, we learned of the sophisticated information-gathering tactics that drive its decision-making. When al-Shabaab entered the offices of the American NGO International Medical Corps and arrested its employees, the insurgents confiscated all of the computers and reportedly sent them to Dinsoor where computer forensic specialists exploited the hard drives. Al-Shabaab has requested all aid organizations to submit a list of donors and most assume it will use this information to decide which partners to retain. In addition, al-Shabaab operatives use the Internet to research funding information for all international and national organizations in Somalia, and have threatened some of those that seem over-dependent on the U.S. government. We understand that some American NGOs are allowed to continue operations because al-Shabaab perceives their funding sources (as listed on their websites) to be equally balanced between the United States and other countries.

¶15. (S/NF) While al-Shabaab has become emboldened by its successes on the ground, its hold on territory is in many places still tenuous. There are several new armed groups flexing their muscles. For example, at the end of November in Galguduud region, Islamist groups fought each other, killing two and wounding six. The fighting erupted after a group identified as Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a attacked fighters allied with Robow's al-Shabaab. On December 6, al-Shabaab lost battles against the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in Dhobley. On December 7, al-Turki's al-Shabaab sustained heavy losses in Afmadow where 22 fighters were reported killed, three technicals destroyed, and two captured by the ONLF force that opposed them. There have been several attacks, including an IED that targeted a WFP-contracted vehicle in Lower Juba on November 27, carried out by a group called "Amniyat." According to one Embassy contact, this may be a secretive extremist assassination squad operating independently of al-Shabaab in Lower Juba and perhaps other regions.

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ENDF Remains, But Selectively Engaged  
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¶16. (S/NF) Due to recent, frequent movements, it is difficult to determine exactly where and to what extent the Ethiopians are deployed. ENDF recently established control over Balanbal, a border town in Galgaduud region. In Gedo province about two weeks ago, ENDF vacated its forward operating base in Luq and established a base in Burhakaba town, 18 miles north of Baidoa where government forces were under direct attack. Confronted with ENDF, the al-Shabaab forces that had taken control of Burhakaba quickly withdrew and ENDF reportedly began security operations to identify al-Shabaab remnants and allies. On December 8, we received



reports of an influx of ENDF troops to Luq and Dolow. Ousted Kismayo administrator and warlord Barre Hirale reportedly sent his own fighters to the area to support ENDF troops in their planned withdrawal from Hiraan through Bay and Bakool regions. Ethiopia's plans remain unclear, but with a weakened TFG, ENDF are moving troops, re-establishing bases, and making sometimes surprising strategic alliances. A large percentage of Ethiopia's troops and equipment remain in the capital, though many reports indicate they have vacated some locations in the city.

¶17. (S/NF) While ENDF remains in Mogadishu, their defense of key TFG outposts appears lackluster at best. For example, during heavy fighting in Mogadishu on November 19, ENDF forces were concentrated at Villa Somalia, yet did not fire back when the Presidential Guard came under attack, despite being equipped with tanks and other heavy equipment. Some speculated that because of Ethiopia's desire to sideline TFG President Abdullahi Yusuf and its efforts to conclude its mission in the country, it reduced security operations to a minimum. On November 26 Ethiopia arrested the commander of the TFG Presidential Guard on suspicion of arms trafficking and detained several of their vehicles. Though the commander and the vehicles were released after a few hours, this incident further soured the already contentious relationship between President Yusuf and the Ethiopians.

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Conclusion  
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¶18. (S/NF) The security situation on the ground in Somalia is changing hourly. In the last few days, al-Shabaab took over the administration of Dhusamareb in Galgaduud, established administrations in Wajid and Merka in Lower Shabelle, captured towns near Beletweyn in Hiran, and now effectively controls much of central Somalia. The fact that al-Shabaab administrators seem to faithfully convey Robow's messages suggests a high level of coordination and message control. Al-Shabaab's communications, technology, and information network is sophisticated and thus far, the alliance has contained internal divisions and clan rivalries.

It appears that al-Shabaab will continue its efforts to increase its influence in areas around the capital. (The ICU still controls Jowhar and the December 9 trip by ARS Chairman Sheikh Sharif to Mogadishu (septel) is likely an attempt to re-establish his influence there.) Despite recent gains by al-Shabaab, its quick withdrawal when confronted by ENDF in Burhakaba suggests that the allied groups may be stretched thin, or that al-Shabaab prefers to wait for the ENDF to depart rather than confront it directly.

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Comment  
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¶19. (S/NF) Although al-Shabaab and its confederates aspire to control much of the country, they may not have the wherewithal to do so. Many Somalia observers believe al-Shabaab would not now launch an all-out attack on Mogadishu, for example. Keeping al-Shabaab on the outskirts of the capital is not the ENDF, they say, whose numbers and presence in the city have dwindled significantly. More significantly for al-Shabaab, there are far too many groups, including networks of very powerful businessmen with armed militias, for success to be guaranteed. Also, no doubt part of al-Shabaab's calculus is its fear that the departure of

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Somalia's "common enemy," Ethiopia, could allow latent Somali resentment of al-Shabaab to bubble to the surface. In other words, the power vacuum created by an Ethiopian, and possibly AMISOM, departure, would quickly be supplanted by a clan and rival organization-based free-for-all in which al-Shabaab would be one of a number contenders. Still, by leading prayers for hundreds of Mogadishu residents, al-Shabaab has

signalled that it is thinking longer-term, as it continues its grassroots mission to win, if not the hearts and minds of Somalis, then at least their acquiescence to its control of much of Somalia.

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